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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that whole language is a philosophy or perspective, rather than a set of practices, this fastback develops a definition of whole language, presents an information processing model of language processes, and discusses theory-practice relationship and assessment as they relate to whole language. Sections of the fastback are: Making Sense of Whole Language; A Holistic View of Language: What Research Says; Theory into Practice: Whole Language Arts; and Whole Language and Assessment. The pamphlet concludes that: (1) theory determines practice; (2) integrated language activities are more powerful than separated ones; (3) whole language arts cut across the curriculum; and (4) instructional goals should drive the assessment of language arts skills. Six figures are included, and a 47-item bibliography is attached. (RS)

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FASTBACK

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Making Sense of Whole Language

John W. Myers

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Making Sense of Whole Language

by
John W. Myers

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The chapter sponsors this fastback to honor three women who have served as chapter president: Kay Walla, Ruth Phelps, and Margaret Edwards. Their work in public schools and higher education has been characterized by a spirit of excellence and a commitment to quality education for all children. Their knowledge of and insight into the teaching of reading have been invaluable to students and teachers alike.

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Making Sense of Whole Language

At a recent conference, I conducted a session in which I began by asking a group of teachers to define "whole language" in their own words. Only two hours earlier, most of these teachers had heard the conference keynote speaker, Jan Duncan from New Zealand, talk about the implementation of a whole-language philosophy in her country. Duncan is a reading specialist at Wellington College of Education and a noted authority on whole language. I expected the responses to my query to be somewhat uniform, reflecting the content of Ms. Duncan's earlier talk. I was wrong. My respondents defined "whole language" as "a technique that uses themes as the basis for instruction," "an approach that moves from the whole to the more specific," "a system for creating language around the learner," "a new idea from New Zealand," "a time to read, read, read to students," "a focus on the individual," "a theory of teaching that integrates all areas of the curriculum," "a developmental philosophy," "a way to experience literature as a whole," "a technique in which there is equal learning and teaching being done by the adults as well as the children," and "no drilling on grammar, spelling, phonics, sentence diagramming, or worksheets."

Whereas Ms. Duncan had spoken clearly of characteristics of whole language as it exists in the New Zealand model, the teachers – many of whom were practicing whole language daily in their classrooms – could not define it adequately. Some assumed that the New Zealand

model was synonymous with whole language. Others equated it with literature-based reading. In reality, it is a little of both, yet neither.

Common Misconceptions

After talking with many teachers, it is clear to me that there is much confusion about what "whole language" really is. And a review of the literature doesn't help much, either. Although definitions of whole language are abundant, we cannot seem to agree on one. Misconceptions about whole language persist as a result of partial or limited understanding of what the approach involves. Some of these misconceptions are discussed below.

Whole language is "whole" because it focuses on the whole child. While this is true to a great extent, the whole-language movement is not to be confused with the earlier whole-child movement. Because whole language focuses on a holistic view of the four language arts – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – it also appears to view the child holistically. Teachers who hold this view are confusing their educational movements.

Whole language is "whole" because it moves from the whole to the part, rather than from the part to the whole. This also is true to a great extent, but it tends to be a view arrived at as a reaction to, or in opposition to, traditional instructional practices. Traditionally, in the teaching of reading and language arts, we taught from parts to wholes. We presented children with building blocks of language and then built on them. Whole language, especially in the area of reading, tends to present children with wholes and helps them to understand the parts as they develop a need to learn in order to communicate. While it is normal to make contrasts when assessing new ideas, this view also misses the target. It portrays whole language as simply a reaction to traditional methods, without recognizing its full dimensions.

Whole language is "whole" because it is the "natural" way to learn language. Again, there is truth here based on what we have learned

about the nature of language acquisition, but it overlooks what we believe about the holistic nature of the four language arts. "Natural" is seen as a synonym for "whole." This view, which has its origins in what has been written about the New Zealand model, ignores the holistic nature of language.

Whole language is what they do in New Zealand. Again, this is true. New Zealand follows a holistic approach to the teaching of language arts in their schools. There are some very good things going on in New Zealand schools these days. The danger, however, is that teachers may view everything done in the schools of New Zealand as whole language. There are, for example, practices related to testing and grouping in the New Zealand model that differ from what is done in the United States. Some teachers assume that, because these practices are done in the schools of New Zealand, they, too, constitute whole language. This is an example of what I call the "magnet" phenomenon in education: a good idea comes rolling by and attracts a variety of good practices unto itself. This is what confuses many teachers; they cannot envision the full scope of the whole-language approach, because it has become obscured by the beliefs and practices that have become attached to it. The tendency here is to view any practice that comes from New Zealand as whole language.

Whole language means using certain types of materials and activities in the classroom. Many teachers, with little or no preparation, have been given instructional materials that carry the label, "whole language," and have been told to use them. These teachers tend to view whole language as the materials themselves. In fact, some school districts using these commercially produced materials view them as constituting their whole-language program. Commonly, teachers experience initial success using many of these materials but later tire of them, partly because they find themselves unable to move beyond the scope of the materials. Some school systems who jumped on the whole-language bandwagon early on are now jumping off because of disenchantment with these materials-based approaches.

Whole language is just literature-based reading. As with the others, this one contains a large grain of truth. Much of what we did in the past under the label of "literature-based reading" falls under the whole-language umbrella as well. But a holistic view of language goes beyond literature-based reading. In some of the literature, whole language is associated primarily with reading instruction, with little attention given to the other language arts, except in a supportive role. When viewed in this manner, whole language tends to be seen as an approach appropriate primarily for the early elementary grades.

Whole language is thematic teaching. Indeed, a thematic approach to instruction may go hand in hand with the whole-language approach, but it is hardly the same. Thematic approaches have been around for years. Again, the "magnet" phenomenon is operating, in that thematic approaches have been attracted to the whole-language bandwagon. And some teachers have come to view them as synonymous with whole language.

Whole language is a new approach to teaching. This view is essentially a reaction to traditional approaches. It assumes that old or traditional ways of teaching are no longer valid. It is a "throw the baby out with the bath water" attitude. This attitude is reflected in those who say that phonics is never an appropriate approach to teaching reading or that drill-and-practice worksheets are taboo. Such attitudes fail to acknowledge what research tells us: namely, that learners have different needs at different times. A given need may best be met through an older, time-tested strategy. A new approach does not mean the demise of an old one. Indeed, only by understanding the truly holistic nature of language are we able to look critically at strategies – old and new – for teaching reading, writing, speaking, and listening and to use them effectively. Much research suggests that an eclectic approach may well be the best.

Whole language is just for the elementary grades. Because much of the literature and many of the commercially produced materials on whole language have focused on the early grades, many teachers

do not recognize its appropriateness for all grade levels. Certainly, if whole language offers a holistic perspective on language learning, then it should be equally appropriate for all grade levels.

The Relationship Between Philosophy and Practice

Too often in American education, teachers are handed a new method and a set of instructional materials and told to implement a program without first being provided with a philosophical framework for understanding the method. Recently, a number of school systems across the nation have jumped on the whole-language bandwagon. They have asked their teachers to implement whole language but have not provided them with a philosophical basis for doing so. In some cases, teachers have used whole-language materials with good results and come to define whole language in terms of those materials. If you ask them why the materials are effective, they cannot tell you. If you ask them what the "whole" refers to in whole language, they have no real understanding. If we cannot agree on a definition for whole language, how can we ever hope to assess its effectiveness in the classroom?

It is not enough simply to implement something. You must fully understand *why* you do it; there must be a rationale or philosophy behind it. We have many people doing whole language who do not really understand it. They can implement recommended practices – often with good results – but do not know why. When driving a car, knowledge of practice is all that is required; you do not need to know the theory of the internal combustion engine. When making instructional decisions, however, practice is not enough. If teachers do not understand the theory or rationale for a certain practice, then they will never apply that practice optimally. In short, if you are to select the best teaching strategies and materials for your students, you must have a clear understanding of the results you seek and of the capabilities of those strategies and materials to achieve them. You must first know what direction you wish to go before you can decide the best

way to get there. In order to evaluate instructional practice, you must first deal with theory.

Toward a Definition of Whole Language

If you look at the growing body of literature on whole language, the variety of definitions, even from the experts in the field, can be confusing. Kenneth Goodman (1986) calls it "a way of bringing together a view of language, a view of learning, a view of people" (p. 5). That covers a lot of ground. Robert Blake (1990) offers 17 "general assumptions" about whole language and then goes on to give separate lists of assumptions for special applications (preschool, first-stage reading, writing, etc.). While the assumptions are good ones, a teacher might easily get lost in the lists. However, it is worth noting that his very first assumption is: "Whole language is a philosophy or theory made up of a constellation of beliefs based upon observation in practical situations" (p. v). Cornett and Blankenship (1990) define whole language by comparing a traditional and a whole-language classroom and looking at how practices differ. Gary and Maryann Manning (1989) stress that "Whole Language is not practice. It is a set of beliefs, a perspective. It must become practice but it is not the practice itself" (p. 10). And so it goes.

Definitions of whole language tend to fall into two categories: philosophy or practice. Since philosophy always determines practice, logic would suggest that when defining whole language, we look at philosophy first. Frank Smith (1992) tells us that the "original philosophy of whole language, even before it acquired the label, had nothing to do with methods, materials, or techniques" (p. 440). According to Smith, it has to do with one's "attitude" or perspective toward language. That perspective or philosophy then determines practice.

Whole language is indeed a philosophy, and its name implies a holistic view of language. It defines language broadly and recognizes a growing body of research that shows the commonalities in the pro-

cesses of written and spoken language. It is based on close observation of the way in which language acquisition occurs and assumes that the best way to acquire language is through real usage. Whereas the traditional approach to teaching language was to begin with small parts and build toward larger units of language, whole language begins by presenting the whole and then helping the student in mastering its parts as need dictates.

In order to practice whole language intelligently, you must first be able to define it clearly for yourself. This does not come about by using certain materials or practices but by looking at what makes this perspective on language "whole." In the past, we viewed reading, writing, speaking, and listening as separate language arts. Accordingly, we taught them that way. We had reading groups separate from writing. And, in most cases, we focused on reading and writing instruction to the exclusion of speaking and listening. We taught children how to identify individual words and had them practice spelling and writing those words. Then we moved to larger structures of reading and writing sentences and then paragraphs. Our theory determined our practice. Now, as we have learned more and more about the nature of language – especially the processes of reading and writing – and as we have learned more about the relationship of thinking and learning, we have come to see great commonality in the language arts processes. The way, then, to begin to understand whole language is by examining what we know about the four language arts processes and their interconnections.

It is the premise of this fastback that whole language is indeed a philosophy or perspective, rather than a set of practices; it is a way of looking at language and learning. What makes whole language *whole* lies in the similarities among the language arts processes – reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It is the holistic nature of language that makes whole language whole. This is the focus of the next chapter.

A Holistic View of Language: What Research Says

Language processes are extremely complex; and we really know little about what happens in the mind of a student when involved in reading, writing, speaking, or listening. As a nation we were not too concerned with reading research until the uproar caused by the publication of Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955. In the years following its publication, federal funds became available for research, studies were commissioned, and new programs were begun.

The same phenomenon occurred in 1975, when *Newsweek* magazine alerted the nation to our "writing crisis" (Dalton 1983). Although the uproar was on a smaller scale, again our attention was directed toward learning more about one of the four language arts. The "writing across the curriculum" movement appeared at the college level and subsequently moved into the public school arena. Projects such as the Bay Area Writing Project and a variety of state-sponsored writing projects for teachers flourished. And more recently, the National Writing Project gained sufficient respectability to attract federal support. Through efforts like the National Assessment of Educational Progress, we have begun to gather comparative data on the reading and writing abilities of public school students and to report that information to a more interested nation. Keep in mind, however, that we still know very little about how Johnny and Jane read. Research into the reading process has only scratched the surface. And many would contend that research in writing is at least 50 years behind research into the reading process.

Still, we know much more about the reading and writing processes than we do about speaking and listening. Reading and writing have traditionally comprised two of the three "R's" in elementary education; speaking and listening generally have been neglected in our schools during the last half of this century. Moreover, research into the listening and speaking processes is limited. We have some interesting models and theories concerning the reading and writing processes, but little related to listening and speaking.

For the purposes of this fastback, let us put aside the intricacies of language processes. Our purpose here is to present models that illustrate the similarities in the processes among the four language arts, recognizing that the specific processes may differ somewhat in actual operation. The reader should be aware, however, that the processes as described here are presented in a simplified form.

The Information-Processing Model

In looking at the four language arts holistically, the model that seems to fit best is the simple information-processing model involving input, processing, and output. According to this model, reading and listening are viewed as input modalities; writing and speaking are output modalities. Whatever occurs in the mind of the person involved in one of these processes takes place in the meaning processor. We are not concerned at this point with any processing details. Graphically, the model looks like this:

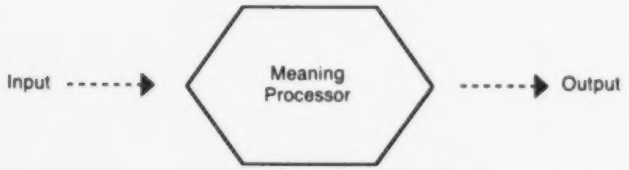

Figure 1: The information-processing model.

Reading and writing are not the only modalities that provide input to the meaning processor. The student who "reads" a book in Braille or tastes a cookie provides sensory data to the meaning processor as well. Our concern here, however, is with the type of sensory input associated with reading (printed word) and listening (spoken word).

Generally speaking, the information processing model is a simple yet accurate way of looking at one relationship among the four language arts. In order to understand the similarities and relationships among the four processes, it is helpful to have a model or framework to hang them on.

The Input Modalities: Reading and Listening

One of the simplest models and clearest explanations of the reading process appears in *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*, by Marilyn Jager Adams (1990). While Adams goes into great detail about the various interactions that occur, I shall keep things simple with regard to detail of description and terminology. Where she uses the terms "orthographic" and "phonological," my adaptation of her model uses the simpler terms "print" and "sound," respectively.

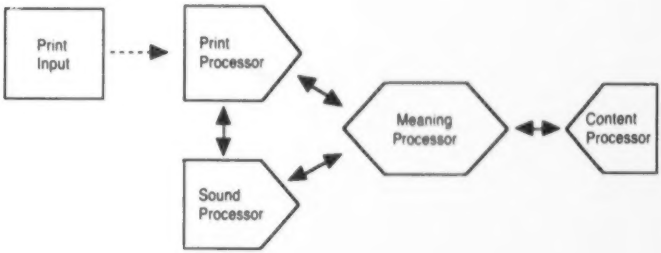

Figure 2: The reading model.

With this model, the written word provides input for the *Print Processor*, which recognizes individual letters and their relationships to one another. As the Print Processor recognizes a pattern, it transmits a string of "excitatory signals" to the *Meaning Processor*. The Meaning Processor receives the signal, searches for matches stored in memory, and sends its response back to the Print Processor. These signals help the Print Processor reconsider and clarify its own messages, sending more signals to the Meaning Processor. This exchange continues at an astounding rate (approximately 43 million bits of information per second), until the meaning is clarified.

While all of this is going on, the Meaning Processor, as part of its search, also sends signals to the *Context Processor*, which helps clarify meaning by plugging the signal into the various contexts in its memory. A similar exchange of signals between these two processors ensues. At the same time, the Print Processor has signaled the *Sound Processor* as well. This is the point at which the reader may say parts of or an entire word to himself. Signals from the Sound Processor are then exchanged with the Meaning Processor. This entire process of exchanged signals among the various processors continues until meaning for the written input is established. In this model, the Meaning Processor is central and is capable of interacting with all other processors. In terms of the commonalities between the input modalities, the model also shows continuous two-way interaction between the Print Processor and the Sound Processor.

Research into the similarities between the reading and listening processes suggest that the model may be equally suited to describe listening.

In this case, the input is in the form of meaningful sound. It arrives at the Sound Processor, which sends a string of signals to the Meaning Processor. The Meaning Processor, in turn, searches memory and sends signals in response to the Sound Processor. At virtually the same time, it establishes a similar exchange with the Context Processor, which tries to clarify meaning contextually. It is logical to suppose

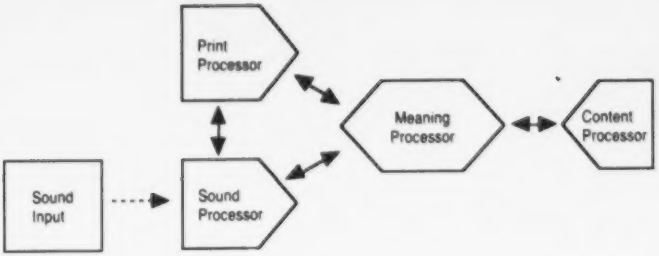

Figure 3: The listening model.

that the Sound Processor also sends signals to the Print Processor. Perhaps this is why it is human nature to turn our eyes in the direction of a sound that we hear; perhaps the Print (visual) Processor is attempting to play its role in clarifying meaning. Certainly, if it sounded like "Hello" and you see someone approaching you in a friendly manner, visual observation should help provide input for determining meaning. As with the reading model, signals continue to run at an astounding rate (8,000 bits of information per second) among the various processors until meaning is settled upon (Lundsteen 1979). Both processes are recursive.

Further evidence of the congruent relationship between the reading and listening process models is provided by research suggesting that reading and listening have the following commonalities:

1. While we quickly learn in our classrooms that our good readers are also our good writers, we are less apt to notice that our good readers are also our best listeners. And poor readers tend to be poor listeners. Indeed, research suggests that an effective technique for children needing remedial reading instruction is to work on their listening skills.

2. The decoding skills required for effective reading appear identical to those required for effective listening. In addition, reading and

listening utilize corresponding signal systems; that is, intonation and pauses for oral language serve the same purposes that punctuation marks do for written language.

3. It appears that reading rarely, if ever, relies only on visual input. If words are important to meaning, even excellent readers "sound out" words. Once basic skills in both reading and listening are established, the two processes appear to cooperate in finding meaning, regardless of the nature of the input.

4. Both processes require a level of readiness to learn, which includes some language experience, an adequate speaking and listening vocabulary, and short-sequence memory skills.

5. Research suggests that there is also a relationship between reading and listening vocabularies. If a person reads a new word or phrase and integrates it into his reading vocabulary, he is also more likely to recognize and attribute correct meaning to the word or phrase when it is heard. The same interaction appears to occur when words are first added to the listening vocabulary.

Both input modalities – reading and listening – are encoding processes that are recursive. The fact that a single graphic model can accurately depict these processes suggests a congruency of models, in effect, a holistic view of the input modalities of language. Now, what of writing and speaking – the output modalities?

The Output Modalities: Writing and Speaking

The model that seems most clearly to describe the output modalities of writing and speaking is adapted from the work of Bereiter (1980), who sees the writing process as highly recursive. While discarding his triangle-shaped model in favor of the information-processing model, I shall continue to use his terminology and definitions.

Since this model represents an output modality, we must assume that input (perhaps a writing assignment from the teacher) has already been decoded by the Meaning Processor from the reading model. Now the mind is ready to code and output the written response. According

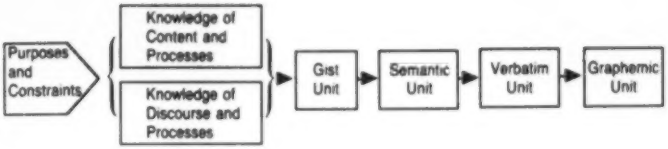

Figure 4: The writing model.

to Bereiter, this response begins with a consideration of *Purposes and Constraints*. In effect, the brain begins by making decisions about the nature of the audience and the purpose of the writing as well as about various limitations on the task, ranging from the physical environment to writing materials available. Once the parameters of the assignment are defined, two areas of knowledge are accessed simultaneously – *Knowledge of Content and Processes* and *Knowledge of Discourse Types and Processes*. The first area contains two types of knowledge: knowledge of the content to be dealt with and knowledge of processes for accessing that content. The second area also contains two types of knowledge: knowledge of the types of discourse and knowledge of processes for accessing the appropriate type. Research suggests that some of the problems experienced by young writers may be due to an inability to access the information they have in memory. The writer may know a great deal of content; but if he cannot get at it when needed for a writing assignment, that knowledge cannot be utilized.

Once the content is accessed and the appropriate type of discourse identified, the mind begins thinking in words. The first step is the development of the kernel of an idea, called a *Gist Unit*. According to Bereiter's model, this is an indistinct step; the idea is there but cannot yet be placed into words. When the idea has evolved sufficiently that the writer is thinking in words, the units of thought are called *Semantic Units*. When the writer can state those words orally, they become

Verbatim Units. And when the writer picks up a pencil and puts them to paper, they become *Graphemic Units*. At each of these stages, the entire process remains recursive. Decisions about purpose and audience may be revised as the writing-thinking process progresses. And all of this takes place at an amazing rate. Researchers have noted that in the brief time it takes to move from the verbatim to the graphemic level, many writers will change their wording. The brain works so quickly and recursively that it revises thoughts before the writer can get them onto paper.

Except for the level of Graphemic Units, this model fits speaking equally well.

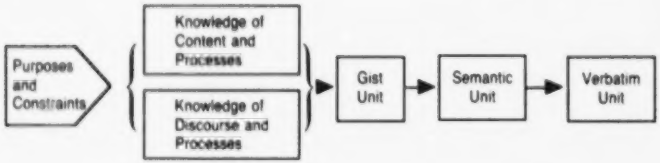

Figure 5: The speaking model.

In developing a spoken response, the brain goes through the same process. When the input has been decoded by the Meaning Processor, the brain first considers *Purposes and Constraints*. Decisions are made concerning audience, the purpose of the oral response, and various constraints. Then, memory is simultaneously accessed for *Knowledge of Content and Processes* and *Knowledge of Discourse and Processes*. The content of the oral response and its format are selected. The process then moves through the *Gist*, *Semantic*, and *Verbatim* stages. The only difference from the writing process is that the *Verbatim Unit* completes the process. The words are spoken. And just as we go on in the writing process to edit what we have written,

we also edit our speech – correcting, rephrasing – as the recursive nature of the speech process revises our thoughts.

And so, the output modalities – writing and speaking – are decoding processes that are also recursive. Except for the act of taking pencil or pen in hand (Graphemic Unit), the models are congruent. This is why writers such as James Moffett (1983) speak of "composition," whether writing or speaking, as a single process. The process is the same.

In the output modalities shown above, an Editing step could be added at the end of the process. In Bereiter's original writing model, this is where most of the traditional view of writing as a "product" takes place. It occurs when the product – written or oral – is present. In writing, we go back and change words on the paper; in speaking, we change our wording, clarify something we have said, or disavow what we have said.

Relationships Between the Modalities

Clearly, there are similarities of process between the input modalities (reading and listening) and the output modalities (speaking and writing) of language. In order to build a holistic model of language, it is necessary to point out the connections between the input and output modalities. Returning to our original information-processing model, it is clear that such a model inherently suggests close relationships.

The input modalities provide input for the system, decoding what comes into the system and sending it to the Meaning Processor; the output modalities then encode the outgoing response. The modalities are two sides of a single coin. Sara Lundsteen (1979) and others have pointed out similarities between listening and speaking. Both share a common code and vocabulary. The same seems to be true of reading and writing. Although there is clearly a relationship between reading and writing, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress have recently verified something that language arts teachers

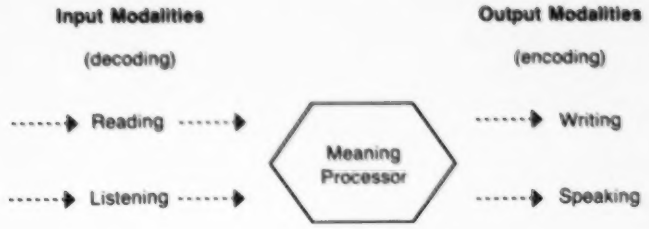

Figure 6: The holistic language model.

have known for some time: better readers tend to be better writers. Likewise, research – and common sense – suggests that better listeners also tend to be better speakers. Thus, with strong input-output relationships between the modalities, it should be clear that the four language arts may be best viewed as a whole.

Whole Language: A Workable Definition

Having built a case for viewing the four language arts holistically, I believe that the best way to define "whole language" is in terms of these relationships: Whole language is simply a perspective toward teaching that recognizes the holistic (whole) nature of the four language arts processes – reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Whole language is not concerned with practice, as such; rather, it is concerned with the theory behind practice.

If you view language as a whole, then the implications for practice are immense. If theory determines practice, then a holistic view of language leads to holistic practice. In short, teachers who understand language as holistic will select strategies and activities for the classroom that capitalize on the relationships among reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Traditionally, we taught reading in reading groups and writing as a product, because we held a separate view of language. We did not recognize the synergy that exists among the four language arts. We viewed them separately, so we taught them separately. And, generally, we ignored listening and speaking. Despite common sense that tells us that good readers are good writers, we failed to acknowledge the real connection among the language arts.

The holistic view suggests that if you want better writers, do not teach just writing. Concentrate also on reading, listening, and speaking. We have begun to realize that when we boost skills in one area, there is progress in other language areas as well. Research supports the idea that there is more power in teaching based on a holistic approach to teaching language; there is a kind of synergy that allows the learner to learn more effectively. This is the theory that supports the whole language arts approach to implementing whole language.

Theory into Practice: Whole Language Arts

If we accept the premise that whole language is a way of viewing language holistically, then it follows that this premise must influence what occurs in the classroom. If we view language holistically, if we believe that activities in one language arts area can produce benefits in another, then we should expect to see our theory reflected in classroom practice. Thus the teacher who practices whole language is one who selects strategies and instructional activities that are compatible with a holistic language philosophy.

Research suggests that the most appropriate strategies and activities to implement a whole-language philosophy are those that involve more than one of the four language arts. This is what Dorothy Hennings refers to as the "natural, integrated language arts approach" (1990, p. 10). She suggests that strategies and activities most appropriate to a whole-language approach are those that involve all four of the language arts.

The whole language arts approach ensures that students are involved in integrated language arts activities, in which every student is called on to read, write, speak, and listen. The approach assumes that activities that build skills in one language arts area will enhance skills in others. It assumes that just as good readers are likely to be good writers, the same relationship also exists among the other language arts. While experience suggests that these relationships may be stronger between print modalities (reading and writing) and oral mo-

dalities (listening and speaking), the whole language arts model assumes that the same relationships exist between input (reading and listening) and output (writing and speaking) modalities. It recognizes a certain synergy among the language arts processes, so that the more areas addressed by a learning activity the more power is inherent in that activity. Thus a learning activity that involves only reading and writing does not have the power that an activity involving reading, writing, speaking, and listening provides. Whereas in the past, we focused on reading and writing, a true whole-language approach requires that listening and speaking receive equal attention, and that all four language arts be integrated into instruction. For teachers trained in a tradition that emphasized reading and writing more than listening and speaking, this will require serious effort.

One of the easiest ways to implement a whole language arts approach is to adapt one of the cooperative learning strategies, such as Student Teams-Achievement Division (STAD), Teams-Games Tournaments (TGT), and Jigsaw, developed by Slavin (1987) and others. By way of illustration, the following cooperative whole language arts activity is one that has proven highly effective.

Stories from Pictures: A Group Creative Writing Activity

Materials required:

1. Paper and pencil for each student.
2. One photograph or magazine picture per student. Select pictures that feature people rather than landscapes or objects.
3. Tables that will seat 5 to 6 students each.

Procedures:

1. Students are seated 5 to 6 to a table.
2. Each student receives one or more pieces of lined paper and a picture or photograph.
3. Each student is instructed to spend a few moments studying the picture or photograph and then to write the first three

sentences of a story. Students are to write legibly on every other line.

4. When each student at the table has written the first three sentences, the papers and pictures are passed to the person to the right. That person then studies the picture, reads what has been written thus far, and adds three more sentences.

5. This process continues until all members at the table have added three sentences to the story and the paper and picture return to the story's initiator. The student who began the story then adds three final sentences to bring closure.

6. Each student then reads his or her story to the group at the table. After discussing the merits of each story, the group picks one story to share with the class. One person is elected to read on behalf of the group.

7. After each table presents its chosen story to the class, the class discusses the merits of each and then selects one story as the best in the class.

8. If desired, the story selected as best by the class, or the best story from each table, or even every story may be posted along with its picture on the bulletin board. Or the students' work may be "published" in some other format, such as a looseleaf notebook.

Discussion:

This activity makes use of the social interaction associated with cooperative learning and engages all students in each of the four language arts. In the first part of the activity, students write and read what they and their peers have written. In the second part, they read their own stories aloud and listen to those of their peers. Finally through discussion, they make some critical judgments about the merits of the stories.

Cooperative learning activities are easily adaptable to whole-language approaches, because they usually involve much verbal group

interaction. However, whole-language approaches also can be used with most traditional assignments involving reading and writing by adding listening-speaking components, such as oral discussion (small or large group). Moreover, the whole language arts approach is not limited to the language arts classroom. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are universal communication skills appropriate to all content areas. The following activity from the social studies is an example.

Revolutionary War Letters: The Boston Tea Party

Materials Required:

1. Paper and pencil for each student.
2. Tables or desks arranged to facilitate small-group interaction.
3. Teacher-prepared fact-sheets related to the events of the Boston Tea Party, which include information presenting both the loyalist and the patriot points of view.

Procedures:

1. Students are seated in groups of 5 to 6 and given paper and pencils, along with a fact-sheet related to the events surrounding the Boston Tea Party.
2. Each group is instructed to spend a few moments discussing the facts presented in the fact-sheet.
3. Each group is instructed to prepare a letter (one per group) from an American patriot to a kinsman in England. The purpose of the letter is to explain the patriot point of view and the rationale behind the Boston Tea Party and related events. Each group will proofread its letter and select a spokesperson to share it orally with the class.
4. Each group's letter is read aloud, after which the class discusses the merits of each letter. The teacher facilitates discussion by emphasizing key points in the loyalist and patriot points of view.

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5. A follow-up activity could involve writing the kinsman's (a loyalist) response.

6. Letters may then be published as part of a bulletin board display or in some other manner.

Discussion:

Again, this activity offers ample opportunity for reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities. Students are called on to read the fact-sheets, to participate in discussion, to write and edit their letters, to listen to letters read, and to discuss their merit with their peers.

The two examples given above demonstrate how the four language arts are integrated to make them whole-language learning activities. There is a synergy among the four language arts that amplifies the learning of both skills and content, which would not occur if each language art was addressed separately.

Whole Language and Assessment

The problem of assessing student progress in a whole-language classroom is a concern of many. Many whole-language advocates feel that traditional means of assessment, such as worksheets, multiple-choice tests, and standardized tests, are inappropriate. The preferred form of assessment seems to be the portfolio, which relies primarily on samples of student writing and observational data on other language behaviors.

In my view, the key problem with whole-language assessment results from our tendency to include too much in our definition of whole language, as well as the tendency in education to abandon traditional methods when new methods come on the scene. We have a history of "throwing the baby out with the bath water." If we view whole language as all-encompassing, then we are likely to see traditional means of instruction (use of basal readers and phonics) and traditional means of evaluation (worksheets and standardized tests) as anathema. We tend to want to say, "Out with the old, in with the new." Just because a new approach comes along does not necessarily mean that the old ways are no longer useful. For certain students at certain times, a basal reader might be perfectly appropriate, and a worksheet might be very effective in providing needed practice. The same is true for traditional methods of assessment.

If you define whole language as a perspective that guides selection of teaching strategies, learning activities, and methods of assessment,

then the problems of whole-language assessment tend to diminish. There have always been problems related to assessment in the language arts. Anyone who has ever sat down to grade 100 student themes knows this. Skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening are often subjective and difficult to assess. Our understanding of what happens in the decoding or encoding of meaning in the human mind is only theoretical; we see only bits and pieces of the process. We do the best we can with the tools we have. Assessment in the language arts is no easy task, regardless of one's perspective on language.

What is required in both teaching and assessment is an eclectic approach, one that is guided by a knowledge of what works and is based on individual student needs. There are skills related to teaching reading that we have traditionally assessed in objective ways; there are other skills that are best assessed subjectively. Holistic and observational means of assessment often seem best suited for the four language arts.

Planning for whole-language assessment should begin with a consideration of goals. Teachers must first consider what it is they want to assess and then select assessment tools most suited to measure progress toward those goals. To be realistic, planning for assessment must also include a consideration of outside constraints. Many states and school districts mandate use of standardized tests for assessing certain language-arts goals. Unfortunately, not all educational goals are of our own choosing. Nevertheless, effective whole-language teachers devise creative ways for coping with such constraints, while remaining true to their perspective on language. There are many ways to assess a goal. And if whole language is defined in the manner suggested in this fastback, then it is quite possible to cope with constraints and still be an effective whole-language teacher.

Once goals are established, the whole-language teacher must decide what is necessary to know about students' language proficiency and how often the assessment should be made. Then the teacher will have to decide the best way to communicate the assessment results

to students and parents. This is not always easy in an education system that expects evaluation to be in the form of numerical or letter grades. No matter how clearly the teacher might explain a child's progress, parents will continue to ask, "Is that a B+?"

The major problem in using alternate forms of assessment in the language arts is getting students and parents to understand what the assessment means. After reviewing a portfolio with a parent, the response is likely to be: "So, he has a nice portfolio. What's his grade?" In an era that demands increasing accountability, this is a problem that will not be easily solved.

Assessment in a whole-language classroom should seek to measure realistic or authentic uses of language. Depending on the assessment goals, common sense suggests a mix of direct and indirect and formal and informal assessment methods. The choice of specific methods should rest with the teacher.

Suggested Assessment Techniques

The assessment method most commonly advocated for whole language approaches is the portfolio.(See fastback 341 *The Portfolio Approach to Assessment* by Emily Grady.) A portfolio is essentially a place to keep evidence of student progress. This evidence may be in the form of written products, informal anecdotal records, teacher comments, formal assessment results, audio- or videotapes, and other items. A common form of portfolio is a large, expandable manila folder. Portfolio assessment is not a new idea. In higher education, it is the traditional means for evaluating faculty members for promotion and tenure. It is also commonly used by artists and photographers when presenting samples of their work to clients or competition judges.

A portfolio is an excellent way to compile a profile of student progress. The key is ensuring that a sufficient number of assessment samples are included to provide an accurate profile and record of progress, and that the items included reflect a balance in number and type. To achieve balance, reading and writing cannot be given prominence over

speaking and listening. This can easily happen because there are more means of assessing reading and writing than there are for listening and speaking. This balance should also reflect the priorities set by the teacher when determining assessment goals.

In addition to the problem of explaining whole-language assessment to parents, another problem is knowing what tools are available to measure progress in the four language arts and how to use them. Following is a selective list of assessment methods grouped by language arts area.

Writing

1. Direct Assessment: The strength of this approach is that it involves review of actual student writing samples. Direct assessment techniques include: a) *holistic*, which provides a comprehensive overview of a student's writing performance; b) *analytical*, which assesses a writing sample trait by trait (word choice, paragraph structure, organization, etc.); c) *primary trait*, which focuses on a specific primary trait; d) *mechanics*, which focuses on such matters as capitalization, punctuation, spelling, etc.; and e) *T-unit analysis*, which assesses syntactical abilities. Any of these direct assessment techniques are appropriate for a whole-language approach, depending on the goals the teacher wishes to address.

2. Writing Folders: Sometimes called writing portfolios, this tool provides a continuing record of a student's writing performance and progress. It might include information on topics written about, beginning and completion dates for assignments, anecdotal records related to assignments, skills mastered, reports of writing conferences, and records of tests. The volume of items may dictate classifying them by category within the folder.

3. Student Journals: Having students keep journals is a technique that has been around language arts classrooms for a long time. They can be used for a wide range of informal assessments, providing op-

portunities for what Kirby and Liner call "fishing in the river of your mind" (1988, p. 58).

4. Anecdotal Records: A teacher's brief written observations about students' writing can serve as informal assessments of progress. These can range from hand-written notes to special forms or checklists to be filled in. They focus on events and observations about students during the writing process.

5. Writing Conferences: These are scheduled meetings between the teacher and a student to discuss the student's writing. They provide an opportunity for informal assessment, which is non-threatening to the student. A written report of these conferences usually is placed in the student's writing folder. The conference may involve self-assessment by the student writer as well as the teacher's review of the writing selections in the student's folder. The key is to hold them frequently enough to help the student with future writing assignments. And they should be structured enough to keep the focus on the student's writing needs and the teacher's writing goals.

6. Peer Assessments: This technique involves students conducting informal assessments of other students' writing. These usually are done orally, although sometimes the teacher provides a checklist of questions for the peer reviewer to use in doing the assessment. Peer assessment requires that students learn to be tactful when evaluating the works of others.

Reading

1. Teacher Observation: This technique is used to monitor the silent reading process. Much can be learned by observing students' non-verbal behaviors while reading silently. These observations may become anecdotal records for students' portfolios.

2. Oral Reading/Miscue Analysis: Although cumbersome for the teacher to administer while working with a whole class, a trained observer can provide insights into oral reading proficiency through for-

mal miscue analysis. In any event, observation of oral reading also provides assessment opportunities.

3. Cloze Test: This technique is used to assess general or specific comprehension. A commonly used cloze test has the student read a passage in which every fifth word is deleted. The object is to see if the student comprehends the gist of the passage despite missing words.

Cloze tests are among the easiest teacher-made tools for assessing levels of comprehension. The teacher begins by locating a passage of approximately 250 words and, starting with the second sentence, deletes every fifth word until there are 50 deletions. The passage selected should be typical of materials used in class. Students are asked to fill in the blanks with the exact word that was deleted. The number of correct responses is then tallied. Correct spelling is not required, but synonyms are considered incorrect. The number of correct responses is converted to a percentage and scored against the following scale: Independent Reader, 57% or more; Instructional Assisted Reader, 44% to 56%; Frustrated Reader, below 44%. Students who achieve at 57% or above may be given a more difficult cloze test, until the highest instructional level is identified.

4. Reading Conferences: These one-on-one sessions between student and teacher provide the opportunity for many kinds of assessment (vocabulary knowledge, word attack skills, comprehension, oral reading fluency, etc.).

5. Comprehension Tests: Often informal and teacher-made, these consist of a series of questions to be answered orally or in writing following the reading of a selection.

6. Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA): This popular technique developed by Stauffer (1980) is used to assess a reader's predictive skills. The technique requires readers to make predictions before reading, read to check those predictions, and then repeat the process.

Speaking

1. Teacher Observations: The technique often involves the use of checklists to assess oral speaking skills.

2. Peer Assessment: Such techniques as the "Inner-Outer Circle" (the inner circle discusses, the outer circle observes) lend themselves to peer assessment. At a simpler level, peers may provide feedback on the oral performance of their classmates in the same manner as a teacher observer might.

3. Self-Assessment. This technique is most effective when used with a videotape or audiotape recording of the student. A checklist can be used to provide structure for the assessment.

Listening

1. Directed Listening-Thinking Activity (DL-TA): An adaptation of DR-TA described above, this technique calls for students to predict before listening, listen to check those predictions, and then repeat the procedure as they continue to listen.

2. Structured Listening Activity (SLA): In this technique, developed by Choate and Rakes (1987), the teacher introduces a text passage by relating it to listeners' past experience and teaches any new vocabulary. The teacher directs the students to listen for certain important points as she reads, guides the students through the passage with key questions, asks questions after reading, and finally asks them to summarize or retell the passage.

3. Dictation and Transcription: Students' listening skills may be assessed while taking dictation from the teacher, from peers, or from an audiotape. However, some researchers maintain that the technique has been misused by teachers in the past and may be viewed by students as of limited value.

4. Retelling: This activity may be either a speaking or listening assessment technique. In essence, students are asked to retell what they have heard. The teacher reads a story to the group and provides them with a listening guide of important ideas in the story. Then individual students retell the story in their own words.

5. The Wilkinson Framework: Developed by Wilkinson, Stratton, and Dudley (1974), this activity provides a framework for listening

analysis. Typically, the class first listens to audiotape or videotape presentations. These may be speeches, TV or radio ads, or recordings of class discussions. After listening, the students are asked to respond to six questions: Who is speaking? What is being said? To whom is it addressed? Why is it being said? What is the setting or occasion? How is the message transmitted verbally and non-verbally? This activity requires students to apply higher-level critical analysis skills.

Whether using a whole-language approach or more traditional methods, the key to effective assessment is to select those assessment tools that are most appropriate for the skills you need to assess.

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Conclusion

To make sense out of the confusion surrounding the term "whole language," we need first to settle on a viable definition. In this fastback, the author contends that the best way to define whole language is to turn to the research in the four language arts – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – to find out what makes language "whole." When we do, we find striking similarities of process between the *Input Modalities* (reading and listening) and the *Output Modalities* (speaking and writing). By using a simple information-processing model, congruencies can also be seen between the input and output modalities. In essence, the four language arts processes are more alike than they are different. Hence, the terms "whole language" and "whole language arts."

When applying the whole language arts approach as described in this fastback, keep in mind the following:

1. Theory determines practice. The whole language arts approach is a perspective – a way of viewing language – which guides a teacher in setting goals, developing instructional strategies and activities, and selecting appropriate methods of assessment. Whole language is not something you do in a classroom; it is something you do in your mind. When you view language holistically, you will teach holistically.

2. Integrated language activities are more powerful than separated ones. In terms of learning potential, strategies and activities that inte-

grate two or more of the four language arts skills have more power. The best activity is one that provides a balance of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in a single lesson.

3. Whole language arts cuts across the curriculum. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are communications skills, appropriate to all content areas. We have long recognized the importance of reading and writing across the curriculum; now we need to incorporate speaking and listening as well. Language arts is not a content field; it is the way we communicate in the real world.

4. Instructional goals should drive the assessment of language arts skills. But assessment is not easy. We live in a society that asks us to quantify and describe objectively, but that is hard to do where communication skills are concerned. The whole language arts approach accepts that both subjective and objective means of assessment are appropriate for reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Selection of assessment tools depends on the goals you seek to assess in the language arts areas. And these come from the needs of your students.

When considering the whole language arts approach or another approach to whole language, remember that the real-world communication needs of our students must guide us in making instructional decisions. The whole language arts approach has a research base and makes common sense. Admittedly, we know little about what really occurs in students' brains as they engage in the language arts processes, but we are learning. In many ways the whole language arts approach is mostly theory. In reality, we can prove little of it – until we apply it to our own classroom. Then, theory becomes practice.

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